

# NEWS CGIAR

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CONTACT:

Heinrich von Loesch  
Tel: (202) 473 8913  
FAX: (202) 473 8110

## FIGHTING THE BLACK DEATH: INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH AWARD FOR BREEDING DISEASE RESISTANT PLANTAINS

Washington, D.C., October 24--The International Institute for Tropical Agriculture (IITA) today received the 1994 King Baudouin Award of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). The award was given in recognition of IITA's pioneering research on breeding hybrid plantains resistant to black sigatoka--a devastating disease of plantain and banana (*Musa* spp.) in Africa--and for advances made in the genetics of *Musa*.

Black sigatoka, a leaf spot disease first discovered in the Sigatoka valley of Fiji, is devastating plantain and banana crops in Africa which are said to exceed maize (corn), rice, and cassava in value. It is the most serious constraint to plantain and banana production in Sub-Saharan Africa, causing 30-50 percent yield losses.

Caused by the fungus *Mycosphaerella fijiensis*, this disease could not previously be tackled by research because the crop was unresponsive to classical breeding methods due to its almost complete sterility. A breakthrough in *Musa* breeding technology recently achieved by the Nigerian based IITA allows the breeding of plantains for black sigatoka resistance. "Millions of small African farmers and their families for whom plantains are a nutritious and tasty basic food will benefit from IITA's scientific advances. This is truly a milestone contribution toward stemming the long-term decline of per capita food production in Sub-Saharan Africa," said CGIAR Chairman Ismail Serageldin in giving the biennial award to IITA Director General, Lukas Brader.

Using techniques involving basic, strategic, and applied research, IITA developed the hybrid plantains resistant to black sigatoka in collaboration with twelve national agricultural research systems in Sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America as well as the International Network for the Improvement of Banana and Plantain (INIBAP) in France and a number of advanced laboratories in Belgium and the USA. The resistant hybrids are expected to increase household revenue for smallholders and reduce dependence on chemical control strategies. The higher yields may also reduce the need to expand cultivation to larger land areas. These developments will contribute to food security in Sub-Saharan Africa, increase income generation for smallholders, and enhance the sustainability of *Musa* production.

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Mailing Address:  
1818 H Street, N.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20433, USA

Telephone: (202) 473-8913  
Telex: 440098 World Bank  
FAX (202) 473-8110

Office Location:  
801 19th Street, N.W.

The King Baudouin Award, named after the late Belgian monarch, was established by the CGLAR in 1981 after the CGLAR was the recipient in 1980 of the King Baudouin International Development Prize of Belgium. The CGLAR's award is biennial and recognizes an outstanding achievement by one or more of its centers in the development of a technology which has great potential impact in developing countries.

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